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# Female Identity and Race in Contemporary Afrofuturist Narratives:

## *Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler

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*Ce mémoire intitulé*

# Female Identity and Race in Contemporary Afrofuturist Narratives:

## *Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler

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# Résumé

Ce mémoire explore les notions de race et d'identité féminine à travers le récit afro-futuriste *Wild Seed* d'Octavia Butler. Décrit comme le nouveau genre de la 'fiction spéculative' par les théoriciens universitaires, l'afro-futurisme joint le spéculatif au réalisme afin d'explorer les conjonctions entre les diasporas africaines, l'écriture africaine américaine et les technologies modernes. Cette thèse propose une analyse critique et théorique du roman *Wild Seed* d'Octavia Butler, en se concentrant particulièrement sur ses divers concepts et ses allégories historiques. Plutôt que d'ignorer le rôle que jouent les notions de race et d'identité dans la science-fiction, Butler les met en avant dans le roman *Wild Seed* et les questionne en adressant des sujets tels que l'après-colonisation, la tyrannie intime, l'hybridité, la différence, l'altérité, et l'identité. Dans le premier chapitre, j'examinerais tout particulièrement l'influence de la domination de la colonisation patriarcale occidental et l'occidentalisation des africains-américains. Puis, à travers les thèmes du trauma intergénérationnel lié à l'esclavage et de l'objectification des corps noirs qui apparaissent dans le texte, j'analyserais les contradictions présentent dans la lutte des Noirs pour la liberté, la race, et l'incarnation raciale. Le second chapitre explorera les différentes formes de résistance, dramatisées à travers le personnage d'Anyanwu, ainsi que l'utilisation des notions d'espace et de temporalité comme techniques pour comprendre et associer ensemble les problèmes d'incarnation et d'identité des genres: afin de survivre à la domination et au pouvoir perpétrés par la société patriarcale de Doro, Anyanwu doit résister, redéfinir, et reconquérir son identité.

**Mots-clés:** identité, race, récit afro-futuriste, Octavia Butler, résistance, société patriarcale, colonisation occidentale, hybridité, altérité, africains, africains-américains

# Abstract

This thesis explores the notions of race and female identity through Octavia Butler's Afrofuturist narrative *Wild Seed*. Described as a new genre of 'speculative fiction' by scholars, Afrofuturism converges speculative and realist modes in order to explore conjunctions between African diasporas, African American writing, and modern technologies. This thesis provides a theoretical and critical analysis of Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, with a particular focus on its various concepts and historical allegories. The novel *Wild Seed* addresses such topics as post-colonialization, intimate tyranny, hybridity, difference, otherness, and identity, questioning and foregrounding the role race and identity plays in science fiction. In the first Chapter, I will specifically examine the influence of dominant patriarchal Western colonization and its Westernization of African Americans. Then I will analyze the contradictions within the black struggle for freedom, race, and racialized embodiment through the themes of the intergenerational trauma of slavery and the objectification of black bodies found in the text. The second chapter will explore the different forms of resistance dramatized through Anyanwu's character, as well as the use of space and temporality as a process to understand and connect the issues of embodiment and gender identity: Anyanwu has to resist, redefine, and reclaim her identity in order to survive the domination and power of Doro's future patriarchal and biogenetically altered society.

**Keywords:** identity, race, Afrofuturist narrative, Octavia Butler, resistance, patriarchal society, Western colonization, hybridity, otherness, Africans, African Americans

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*To my friend Franceska,*

*who introduced me to Afrofuturism*

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# Introduction

## Afrofuturist narratives: historical, cultural and societal impacts

For the past four decades Afrofuturism has been broadcast as a cultural aesthetic movement, a philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that examines all the links between the various African diasporas and modern technology.[1] Artists, science fiction and Afrodiasporic scholars, such as Sheree R. Thomas, refer to this new genre as "speculative fiction from the African diaspora" (Thomas). Indeed, this new form of storytelling converges speculative and realist modes of writing. In this thesis, I will only work on one of Octavia Butler's novels as the text is theoretically demanding and requires a close reading of its various concepts and historical allegories. Indeed, my thesis will examine Butler's novel *Wild Seed* by focusing on what I consider its central topics: contradictions within the black struggle for freedom, race, and racialized embodiment, and black female subjectivity in the context of Afrofuturist narratives. Butler's exceptional status in black science fiction, being a pioneer in Afrofuturist narratives and an unusual and phenomenal storyteller, is the reason why I decided to focus on only one author.

In order to fully comprehend Afrofuturism—most precisely contemporary Afrofuturist narratives that have emerged in the 20th-century—we have to review its historical development. According to Lisa Yaszek, the history of Afrofuturist storytelling both "parallels and intersects that of science fiction" (43). In fact, "science fiction scholars

[1] For more details information on the term Afrofuturism, see 20th-century cultural critic Mark Dery's "Flames Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture" (1994) and social theorist Alondra Nelson's "Introduction: Future Texts" (2002).

generally agree that science fiction developed from the scientifically—and technologically—inspired stories of classic 19th-century authors including Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells in Great Britain, Jules Verne in France, and Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne in the United states" (43). As Yaszek explains, by associating their well-developed story forms of the fantastic journey, the gothic, and the utopian fiction with precise allusion to modern scientific theories and technological developments, these authors "took the first important steps in creating a new mode of speculative literature that directly engaged the changing relations of science and society as a whole" (44). As a result, during this period, a new form of speculative fiction known today as Afrofuturistic stories started to emerge alongside the science fiction genre. Unlike the science fiction genre, this new speculative fiction does not only portray fantastic stories, but it also integrates questions of race and the history of bondage and slavery into its speculative narratives; thereby Afrofuturism challenges Western and overwhelmingly male narratives of the future. In other words, regardless of the narrative forms they specialized in, 20th-century Afrofuturist authors were in a way bound together by a common interest in portraying the growing relations of society and science fiction, all the while referring to African American history as well as the history of the future. Therefore, in my thesis I will examine the contradictions within the black struggle for freedom, race, and racialized embodiment, and black female subjectivity in the context of contemporary Afrofuturist narrative.

Throughout the 20th-century, Yaszek explains, science fiction narrative has become intertwined with the structure of everyday life. After World War II, the emergence of new sciences and technologies—from medical discoveries to automatic appliances—and the

explosion of the film and music industry[2], offered a new possible future completely different from the past. In doing so, science fiction became a progressively popular way to understand and challenge these changes. Indeed, scholars such as Darko Suvin and Frederic Jameson refer to science fiction as "THE literature of late capitalism" due to its perfect depiction of a modern society, experimenting and living in a high-tech world. Between the 1960s and 1970s, pioneer black Afrofuturistic authors such as Samuel R. Delany, Charles Saunders, Jewelle Gomez, and Octavia E. Butler created new alliances with the science fiction community. The particular overlaps of interest to writers such as Butler and Delany focused around the thematic of gender, sexuality, and racial difference. Both explored how slavery has constructed identity formation and collective memory in African American communities of the U.S. Furthermore, their common interest could be related to the fact that Butler was a student of Samuel R. Delany, as for a short period of time he was her professor of Comparative Literature and Creative Writing; through his teaching, he guided her writing of short stories. Thus, the Afrofuturist authors, together, through different projects[3] aimed to "demonstrate how African slaves and their descendants experienced conditions of homelessness, alienation, and dislocation that anticipate what philosophers like Nietzsche describe as the founding conditions of modernity" (Yaszek 47).

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[2] To understand the impact and real extent that science fiction had on the film industry of the twentieth century, see movies "The Matrix" from America, "Tetsuo: The Iron Man" from Japan, and "Night Watch" from Russia. These films show that science fiction narratives had spread through the global culture.
As for the music industry, in this case it refers to Jazz music, a popular art form of the black culture. Afrofuturists storytelling became the central aspect of Jazz music during mid-twentieth century.
For more detailed discussions of Afrofuturism in jazz and other popular form of Afrodiasporic music, see especially Kodwo Eshun's groundbreaking book *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1998).

[3] For more information on the projects that science fiction authors and Afrofuturist authors created, see conferences such as "Black to the Future" (website at http://cdforum.org/bttf) , publication of books such as Thomas's "Dark Matter" anthologies and the creation of author collectives such as the Carl Brandon Society (see website at http://www.carlbrandon.org/).

However, it is during the 1990s that cultural critic Mark Dery[4] introduces the term "Afrofuturism" to define "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism" (136). Following Dery's steps, social theorist Alondra Nelson expands the definition of Afrofuturism as a "coherent mode of critical inquiry" (Yaszek, 42). Through the exploration of Afrofuturism's research, Nelson points out that the purpose of an Afrofuturistic scholar is to "explore futurist themes in black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture" (Yaszek, 42). In other words, according to Nelson, Afrofuturism is seen as a means of studying the status of black people by examining themes of alienation and aspiration for a better—socially more equitable, and anti-racist—future. Yaszek points out that "as its name implies, Afrofuturism is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well" (47). In fact, in the 20th-century Afrofuturism becomes a cultural and aesthetic platform, travelling back and forth through time and space, imagining utopic futures against dystopic ones. In other words, Afrofuturist narratives allow the Afrodiasporic experience to exist through these new ways. As Yaszek explains, "Alondra Nelson defines Afrofuturism where its science fictional aspects provide both 'apt metaphors for black life and history' and inspiration for 'technical and creative innovations' of artists working in a variety of traditional and new media" (47). Thus, in Afrofuturist narratives, history, as Nelson argues should never stop being a part of identity

[4] See Mark Dery introductory essay "Black to the Future" (1994) where he frames the new improved notions of the term Afrofuturism.

and race as " Afrodiasporic histories insist both on the authenticity of the black subject's experience in Western history and the way this experience embodies the dislocation felt by many modern peoples" (Yaszek, 47).

In Afrofuturistic storytelling, African American literature, different from African Literature, focuses on the frame of literature produced in the United States, from the African's point of view. Through the slave narratives, African-American writers examine the role of African descendants in America within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, gender and social equality, by exploring the issues of the black struggle for freedom and equality long denied to black people in the U.S. The African American writer operates in a context of opposition to oppressive situations as seen in Octavia Butler's work. Indeed, for decades she remained the pioneer of "science fiction's sole prominent black female voice" (Canavan, 2). Through the science fiction genre, she depicts striking realism of Earth's actual history by exploring humanity and its deep fissures of race, sex, and power. Today, scholars and Afrofuturistic writers widely praise her for being a precursor by legitimizing and empowering the voices of women of color. Indeed, as Ytasha L. Womack argues "in a hypermale sci-fi space," a genre mostly monopolized by white males, "where science and technology dominate, Butler provided a blueprint for how women, particularly women of color, could operate in these skewed realities and distant worlds" (110). She is described as a fundamental figure of the cultural aesthetic movement of Afrofuturism as "Butler set the stage for multidimensional black women in complex worlds both past and present, women who are vulnerable in their victories and valiant in their risky charge to enlighten humanity" (Womack 110). However, Butler acclaimed recognition has not always been praised as back in the day her work was

still easily misread. Her Afrofuturistic narratives were not quite well-defined or analyzed by many scholars.[5] In fact, Gregory Jerome Hampton explains that "Butler is barely situated in the genre of Science Fiction by historical texts chronicling the genre … Scholarship published in the 1980s and 90s on Butler's novels and short stories were too often cursory reviews or glances that overlooked the critical potential of the fiction" (xii). As of today, despite the frequent misinterpretation and uneven analysis of her fiction, Butler's magical surrealism and genre defying work remains a powerful pillar of the science fiction genre and the contemporary Afrofuturistic community.

**Octavia Butler's Literary Criticism**

There have been several books, theories and journals[6] devoted to the study of Afrofuturism and its literary criticism; however, up until now, most of the writings that contributed to the development of the topic were not a part of the Africana studies disciplines[7]. When examining the new speculative form Science Fiction, Octavia Butler stands out as the pioneer in Afrofuturism studies. Despite being a prominent writer, her role as a black feminist writer of women science fiction and Afrofuturist narratives such as *Wild Seed*, have had very little literary criticism. In this survey, I will examine various

[5] As Hampton clarifies in *Changing Bodies* (2010) "there are approximately sixty-six PhD dissertations and thirteen master theses written since 1993 that engage some aspect of Butler's fiction directly or at least mentions her writing in a significant manner in relation to other writers inside and outside of the SF genre.

[6] See Kodwo Eshun's book *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998) known as one of the most influential text on Afrofuturism studies; see *Afrofuturism* edited by Alondra Nelson and published by "Social Text", as the most prominent text among journals on the topic.

[7] See *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, which is another critical theory that identify contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism to the field of Africana Studies. For more detailed information see "Part I, Chapter I: Cyborg Grammar?" focusing on Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.

scholars' literary theories and their reflections on Butler's contribution to the development of Afrofuturist studies.

In *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires*, Gregory J. Hampton, through a timely order, situates Butler's fiction in several fields of study, including American, African American, gender, and science fiction studies. Through his analysis of Butler's work, he tries to avoid excluding potential readers. Indeed, Hampton refuses to use over-complicated vocabulary, while questioning and engaging the interdisciplinary discourses that respond to Butler's fiction. In his text, he asserts that the study of Butler's fiction transforms the way the body is imagined in connection to race and gender studies. His book examines how Butler's fiction is able to overcome several "genre boundaries while simultaneously reshaping the genre of science fiction" (Hampton, xi). Through his analysis, he claims that Butler's fiction is fundamental for contemporary and future research on identity formation. This book discusses the role of race, class, and gender as well as it raises questions about what constitutes humanity in Butler's work and in the real world. As Hampton points out, ultimately the purpose of this text is to bring Butler's work to the attention of scholars and other audiences—readers from inside and outside of the academy—who might have overlooked Butler's work and invite them to discover her various Afrofuturist fictions[8]. Thus, Hampton's text relates to the development and discourse around Afrofuturism which is portrayed in my thesis.

In "Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination", Kristen Lillvis theorizes Afrofuturist cultural productions as "historical experiences of disorientation

[8] For a controversial theory see Andre M. Carrington "Speculative Blackness". To discuss the notions of race and identity in speculative fiction and feminist Afrofuturist narratives studies, he deliberately chose to barely refer and include black authors, such as Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany.

converge with contemporary strategies for survival and futurist projections of vitality. As such, the black subject settles in multiple time periods simultaneously" (3). To support her statement, she points out that in an interview, poet and visual artist Krista Franklin states that, "Octavia Butler is a huge influence for me when it comes to that kind of thinking about the future and what the future looks like for us in America. For me, the future is now too: we're living in a wild time. So, my view of the world is an extrapolation of the present and how we survive it" (Franklin and Hazel; Franklin and Andrews). In her text, Lillvis emphasizes the colonial past and the black people struggle to survive it through the Middle Passage journey from Africa to the Americas as "it was a place that captured Africans between continents, languages, and identities" (2). In order to demonstrates how her theoretical text affirms that "contemporary black women's neo-slave narratives claim the future as fundamental to current and past conception of blackness" (8), Lillvis expands her thought through historical events of the Middle Passage. In chapter four, she explains the importance of the Middle Passage experiences in Butler's Afrofuturist narratives as "the temporal and subjective liminality associated with the Middle Passage allows characters and readers to develop an understanding of blackness both associated with and distinct from of the ontology and cosmology of white power" (Lillvis 9). This literary criticism of Butler's work relates to the development and discourse around Afrofuturism argued in my thesis; in chapter one, I discuss the history of the Middle Passage and its fundamental role in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* [9].

[9] For more theories on *Wild Seed* with reference to the history of the Middle Passage and its role in Africa diasporas within North American discourses of black identity formation, see Adwoa Afful's theoretical text "Wild Seed: Africa and its many Diasporas" (website at http://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2016.1240963 ).

The purpose behind the writing of the collection *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture* is that, as editors Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth explained "they wanted to find an anthology of women's cyberpunk fiction for use in a cybertheory course and could not find one, despite the increasing number of women writing what can loosely be called cyberfiction—writing that explores the relationship between people and virtual technologies" (1). In fact, writings on cyberculture are mostly dominated by the 'heroic image' of the male and the 'utopian myth' of a gender-free cyberworld. This collection aims to bring together "woman's fictional representations of cyberculture with feminist theoretical and critical investigations of gender and technoculture" (1). In order to examine feminist science fiction writings through cybertheory, the editors emphasize Octavia Butler's work. Indeed, her Afrofuturist narratives focus on utopias and dystopias system, the Alien form and subjectivities. As the editors explain in their collection, Butler's work depicts intelligent, skilled, adventurous, and highly resourceful heroines. Butler portrays "imaginary cultures in which women are politically or socially dominant, alternative familial and social structures, such as matriarchy, developed, and a marked emphasis was placed on women's feelings, particularly female desire" (4). However, if feminist utopias of the 1970s and 1980s described women's freedom and autonomy, the dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s "accentuated the social and political consequences of the denial of that autonomy" (Flanagan, 5). In other words, dystopias[10], such as Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Pattermaster* (1976), and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy: *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), depicts worlds "in which the feminist movement has

[10] For other literary criticism about dystopias in *Wild Seed*, see Part I of "Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism" (2000) edited by Marleen S. Barr.

failed, and woman are positioned as sexual and reproductive objects rather than as subjects" (Flanagan, 5). Furthermore, the editors compare women writers with aliens since they were themselves alienated in the study of science fiction writing. This alienation has helped writers to explore 'the status of marginality' offering a very different 'alien' viewpoint on the development of cultural categories. In the collection, Flanagan and Booth contrast science fiction with women's science fiction to explain the use of the alien. In science fiction, the representation of the alien provokes anxieties about cultural differences such as "man/woman, white/ black, upper class/ lower class"; however, in women's science fiction they argue that:

> The figure of the alien expose the ways in which racial and gendered boundaries are constructed and the ways in which those boundaries maintain hierarchies of domination and power … Octavia E. Butler, for example, reworks slave narratives through the figure of the alien (in Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind and Clay's Ark) in order to demonstrate the implausibility of fixed racial categories" (Flanagan, Booth 6).

Therefore, the collection book *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, helped me to clarify and build my own ideas and arguments regarding the Afrofuturist narrative *Wild Seed*.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

In my thesis, my theoretical approach to reading the novel *Wild Seed* implicitly draws from feminist and anti-racist theories[11]. In the first chapter of my thesis I will use Mary Bucholtz theoretical text "Black Feminist Theory and African American Women's Linguistic Practice" because it emphasizes feminist theory and social theory which have made explicit the role of language in shaping, reproducing, and challenging power relations. It points out several strands of research on language use among African American women in order to demonstrate the benefits of strengthening the relationship between feminist scholarship in linguistic and other social sciences. Using this theory, I will mainly focus on the Black Feminist theory known as the Black Feminist thought to talk about African American women's writing, such as Octavia Butler.

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's essay "The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror" will also be used in my first chapter. In chapter five of the book F*eminist Theory and the Body,* Yusuf explores the relationship between the notion that physical brutality and force transformed the African body from a liberated body to a captive one, and that the infliction of physical pain unmakes and deconstructs the body, while simultaneously making and reconstructing the world of the perpetrator. She links these two ideas proposing that under the slave economy and colonialization, two kinds of bodies were produced: the body of knowledge and the body of labor. This text will help support my

[11] For more theoretical essays that helped me form ideas in the writing of my thesis, see Christina Sharpe *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* and Ytasha L. Womack *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, which discuss embodiment, time, and race in Afrofuturist studies.

research on identity and power through the representation of black bodies in *Wild Seed*, seen as a commodity and objectification of the women's black body.

Achille Mbembe's essay "African Modes of Self-Writing" addresses profound and important questions of identity formation and the self in postcolonial Africa. He relates to his idea of historical events of slavery, colonization, and apartheid which are part of a collective imaginary and critiques dominant intellectual trends of writing and narrating collective histories. His essay will be used to talk about the intergenerational trauma of slavery discussed in the first chapter of my thesis.

Anne Elizabeth Leonard's essay "Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction" underlines how science fiction and the criticism of the genre have neglected the issues of race and ethnicity. It explains how most English-language science fiction is written by whites and how blackness is being instrumentalized and stereotyped in the process of white identity formation. In *Wild Seed*, through colonization, intimate tyranny, hybridity, difference, otherness, and identity to question the role of race in science fiction instead of ignoring it.

Obioma Nnaemeka's book *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, examines the use of feminist theory to analyze the historical and cultural genealogies that shaped our current social and political context. It navigates the contours of the category woman/mother as 'the other' in past and current debates of orature, literature, and mother tongues of Africa. It deals with African literature reimagining certain central issues in feminism such as motherhood, subjectivity, power, knowledge. It underscores the ways in which space constructs gender identities. This essay will help me examine different forms of resistance found in *Wild Seed* as Anyanwu, the main protagonist, I analyze in my second chapter. It will illuminate the ways in which

Anyanwu uses her superpowers to control her motherhood and her ability to conceive. There is an epistemological violence using women through mother nature and portraying them as if; however, Anyanwu, represented as the Mother, does not allow herself to be allegorized.

Elizabeth Grosz's essay "Space, Time, and Bodies" demonstrates how feminism and cultural analysis have conceptually stripped bodies of their specificity, their corporeality, and the continual traces of their productions as bodies. It examines the ways in which the functioning of the bodies transforms understandings of space and time, knowledge and desire as constructed. *Wild Seed* is a science fiction novel that uses temporality as a process to understand and connect the issues of embodiment and gender identity. Anyanwu represents a cyborg identity. Being capable of transforming herself into multiple simultaneous identities, Anyanwu represents a cyborg identity able to survive in a patriarchal oppressive society.

Linda Martin Alcoff's essay "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics", talks about how the constitutive power of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other forms of identity has finally been recognized as a relevant aspect of almost all projects of inquiry. These concepts are found in *Wild Seed* through Anyanwu's character who has to resist, redefine, and reclaim her identity in order to survive the domination and power of a patriarchal society.

Jenny Wolmark's essay "Alien and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism" studies the ways in which feminist science fiction addresses questions of subjectivity, identity, and difference, and challenges the dual definition of the 'alien' as other and the other as always being 'alien'. This text will support the arguments put forth

in my second chapter which examines *Wild Seed* as an alternative narrative portraying hybridity, superpowers, and animality in the female character of Anyanwu; here, transformation questions what defines identity, race and how one resist the oppressive strategies and effects of a patriarchal society.

**Octavia Butler's Life and Work**

Butler's life and career has not been an easy road. Born in 1947 in Pasadena California, she lost her father as a child and was raised by her mother and grandmother, two of her most considerable influences. Growing up in an impoverished family, Butler's passion for books emerged after her mother would bring back as many books as she could; books that were thrown away by her employer and that she knew her daughter would enjoy reading (Canavan, 2016). Indeed, Mrs. Butler never received a proper education being withdrawn from school at a very young age. By giving books to her daughter, Mrs. Butler sought to offer her daughter the best possible education that she had been denied. The support she received from her mother lead to the development of what she mentions in an autobiographical essay as a "positive obsession" with science fiction writing. In her essay, she frames that concept by stating that "positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts. Positive obsession is dangerous. It's about not being able to stop at all" (Butler 12).

It all began at school, a place where she faced many struggles and challenges. Being dyslexic, shy and six-feet tall made her an outcast amongst her classmates and sometimes even her teachers. In college, her writing style was so unconventional that her teacher would ask her, "can't you write anything normal" (Butler 10). Despite all the difficulties

she encountered, she persisted through college and graduated from Pasadena City College with an associate degree. This obsessiveness she developed while reading is what encouraged her to pursue her dreams of becoming an inspirational writer and overcoming many obstacles throughout her life and career, living in an era of bigotry and a society full of racial and economic disparities. As Butler explains in her autobiographical essay, after graduating she took on many low-wage meaningless jobs in order to have some sort of revenue while focusing on her writings. Then, she was able to attend the Clarion Fiction Writers Workshop where she further studied science fiction with Harlan Ellison.[12]

In 1976, many years after she sold her first two short stories to writer-editors who worked as teachers in Clarion, her first novel *Patternmaster* was published, launching of the *Patternist* series. Soon after, her career took off as a writer and she started to gain recognition for her work. She published some notorious short stories such as "Speech Sounds" and "Bloodchild" which both won the Short Story Hugo Award. However, the publication of her novel *Kindred* in 1979 was the breakthrough of her career. For this Afrofuturistic narrative, she drew her inspiration from personal memories, such as her mother's work and what she witnessed in college, being around the Black Nationalist Movement[13] which fought for the recognition of the racial discrimination and prejudice African Americans faced in the past and still face in the present. Many of the ideas that the movement vehiculated played an important part in the creation of the novel, as well as the ones that followed. As Canavan demonstrates in his critical analysis and thorough

[12] American writer famously known for his creative and influential work in *New Wave Speculative Fiction* and for his candid, energetic and militant personality.

[13] A type of political thought that aim to "promote, develop, and maintain a black race identity for people of black ancestry" (Encyclopedia Britannica). According to Wilson Jeremiah Moses there is three different periods for the movement, in this case I am referring to the third period of black nationalism which started during the post-Reconstruction era in the United States (1900- 1970).

acknowledgment of Butler's life and career, Butler wanted to show through her work that those who survived slavery overcame great struggle which allowed African Americans to survive history and gain the rights they had at the time and encourage the honoring of their ancestors (Canavan, 70-80).

In other words, Butler's Afrofuturistic science fiction work raises deep-rooted questions and issues about the human's place in sociological, psychological and scientific analysis: What is the significance of human nature? Are the roles of the sexes and of race absolute and well-defined or are the lines blurred? What form of societies and families are conceivable, and how would humans adapt and be compatible if confronted to another species of life? In *Wild Seed*, published in 1980 as the fourth novel of the *Patternist* series, Butler uses science fiction to represent and relate the history of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the institution of slavery in the U.S by tracing Doro's story from its origins in Africa to the slave trade in the Americas, as one of his main concerns is the search and capture of his African kinship.

## ***Wild Seed*'s Summary**

The novel starts in 1690 in Africa, introducing one of the main characters, Doro, on the search for his kinsmen as he wishes to take them back to the New World in order to complete his project of seed villages. While going to one of Africa's villages, he encounters the other main protagonist, Anyanwu, and senses her special abilities. After talking to her, he decides that he imperatively needs her to bear children to help him continue creating superpowered humans. By threatening to kill her children, he coerces her intro travelling with him to America and promises her that she will never have to watch her future new

children die. On board the slave ship to the New World, he further explains his plan as he wants to share her sexually with his son Isaac, so they could procreate extraordinary superhuman beings with very special abilities. During the journey, Doro knowing that Anyanwu is a shapeshifter, discovers that she can also transform into an animal, which he cannot sense or kill. What is most special about Anyanwu is that Doro can neither read nor predict her thoughts and behavior. This makes her unruly to him, threatening and fascinating at the same time. Feeling threatened by this new ability, he wonders whether he will have enough control and power over her. On the boat, Anyanwu starts anticipating her new life ahead as she witnesses Doro's barbaric ways and plain disregard for his people, especially the death of one of his sons who Anyanwu kills by mistake. When they arrive at the seed village of the New World, Doro orders Anyanwu to marry and start 'breeding' children with Isaac. Isaac convinces her that this marriage will be the only way to get through Doro as she is the only one strong enough to really defy him.

Fifty years into the future, Doro returns to the seed village. However, his relationship with Anyanwu has deteriorated and the only thing keeping him from killing her is her successful marriage to Isaac. The reason for his return is that he senses that Anyanwu's daughter, Nweke, is too rapidly developing her powers. During her transition, Nweke, incapable of controlling her powers, attacks Anyanwu. While trying to protect his wife, Isaac accidentally kills Nweke. The pain and remorse provoke his heart attack. While trying to heal him back to life, Anyanwu realizes that he is too weak and her husband dies. Now that Isaac is no longer there to protect her from being killed by Doro, Anyanwu transforms herself into an animal and runs away.

A century later, Doro finally tracks Anyanwu down to a Louisiana plantation. To

his astonishment, Anyanwu has formed her own colony, which in many ways is more successful than Doro's. Indeed, she protects and heals her people, letting them be. However, his arrival creates chaos as he forces her to resume his breeding plan through her community. After an incident, resulting in several deaths which ruins the harmony of the colony, Anyanwu becomes restless and fed up with Doro's absolute control, since his immortality makes him the only permanent person in her life. In order to free herself from him, she decides to commit suicide. However, this decision forces Doro to realize his mistakes and have a change of heart. While trying to stop her, in desperation he agrees to compromise if she keeps on living. From that point on, Doro promises that he will never kill for control or power, just as a means to remain immortal; he also promises that he will no longer use Anyanwu as a breeder. Their new relationship is now based on a partnership in which Anyanwu helps him in his quest to find more promising seeds; she becomes more of an ally and a life partner than his slave.

**Thesis Overview**

In an essay, Elizabeth Anne Leonard argues that "science fiction can also be about the past, through alternate history or time-travel plots, and some latter twentieth-century novels make use of these devices specifically to write about racial issues and slavery" (Leonard 258). Indeed, by addressing such topics as post-colonialization, intimate tyranny, hybridity, difference, otherness, and identity, Octavia Butler questions and foregrounds the role race plays in science fiction and, specifically, in *Wild Seed*. Doro, the male antagonist of the narrative is represented as the patriarchal figure who dominates, controls, and subdues his kinsmen in order to create a superhuman race which will ensure his survival

and fulfill his own interests. His actions embody the ones of a colonizer, resembling the master/slave narrative of a neo-colonial specter present in his relationship with Anyanwu and his descendants. The first chapter of this thesis discusses the notion of the black struggle in the context of Butler's science fiction work, as well as historical events and through the theoretical work of Mary Bucholtz, Karen B. Bell, Bibi Bakare-Yussuf, Ron Eyerman, and Barbara Smith. My analysis of Butler's work focuses only on her novel *Wild Seed*. I will specifically examine the influence of dominant patriarchal Western colonization and its Westernization of African Americans. Then I will analyze the contradictions within the black struggle for freedom, race politics, and racialized embodiment through the themes of the intergenerational trauma of slavery and the objectification of black bodies found in the text.

Throughout *Wild Seed*, Butler compares and contrasts the power struggles of the two main characters, Anyanwu and Doro. Anyanwu is described as the strong black female protagonist, seen as the matriarch of her tribe, the healer and nurturer who protects her own. To ensure her survival and the survival of her descendants, she follows Doro's orders which forces her to make compromises. However, these concessions expose her own limits when her identity is challenged and endangered as Doro constantly tries to press her into submission. In her essay "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?", Linda Martin Alcoff explores the forms of identity and explains how identity is constructed through subjectivity, power, and domination. These concepts are found in *Wild Seed* as Octavia Butler uses female identity and black female identity as a medium of resistance against patriarchal oppression in Afrofuturistic science fiction narratives. I will return to Alcoff's notion of subjectivity in the second chapter. Elizabeth Grosz and Obioma Nnaemeka further expand

Alcoff's theory as they underscore the ways in which space constructs gender identities and how the functioning of the bodies transforms understandings of space and time, knowledge and desire as constructed. It can be seen in Doro and Anyanwu's conflicted relationship when throughout her life Anyanwu uses her powers to control her motherhood and her ability to conceive. She also represents a cyborg identity, being capable to transform herself into multiple simultaneous identities, allowing her to escape and survive. Thus, the second chapter explores the different forms of resistance dramatized through Anyanwu's character, as well as the use of space and temporality as a process to understand and connect the issues of embodiment and gender identity: Anyanwu has to resist, redefine, and reclaim her identity in order to survive the domination and power of Doro's patriarchal society.

# Chapter One

## The Slave Trade and Intergenerational Trauma in *Wild Seed*

"No one is born hating another person
because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion.
People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love,
for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite"
—Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*

Being an African American black feminist writer, Octavia Butler works on questions of Afrocentrism and produces stories from her own marginalized position in American society, depicting "the survival of African-American culture throughout history and into the future" (Helford 2472). She once explained in an interview that she began writing about power because she had so little, and as a result, her novels engage with the task of the powerless oppressed African American woman to take actions or, struggle to survive in a dominant patriarchal western society. In "Black Feminist Theory and African American Women's Linguistic Practice", Mary Bucholtz argues that for a long time, feminist theory was largely focusing on white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual adults. Though, after sociologist Patricia Hill Collins further developed the work on black feminist theory, Black Feminist thoughts created within the U.S emerged as means to "make a woman of African descendent central to theory; it is rooted in an understanding of how such women may use historically grounded social practices to develop knowledge that is resistant to hegemonic discourse" (Bucholtz, 1996, 268).

In her work, Butler uses the science fiction genre to underline the past of her characters in a set historical context; she does not use it as a medium to change the course of history but as means to understand and emphasize the systemic oppression of patriarchal western society and its modernity, which uses racialization to build and maintain colonial projects. Butler engages critically with what Paul Gilroy has called "the Black Atlantic". While she adds a feminist perspective, she also complicated his approach to an "anti anti-essentialism". Gilroy, like Butler, is critical of Afrocentric approaches to history and underlines the dangers of "ethnic absolutism", while championing a rather narrow sense of black diaspora and hybridity. David Scott has discussed this—as have many others—in his *Refashioning Selves*. Butler's decidedly feminist sense of "black modernity", usually associated with the onset of the Middle Passage, deviates from and expands Gilroy's famous notion of "black modernity". The novel considers the unavoidable struggle for dominance that occurs when two 'alien' forms of life, with different capabilities, and different needs, encounter each other for the first time. Barbara Smith explains in her theory "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," that due to racism, Black literature has always been seen as an irrelevant subcategory of American literature and states that, "a Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers, is an absolute necessity" (1977, 126). Thus, this is exactly what Octavia Butler shows through her novel *Wild Seed*. I will first talk about the novel's two main characters and their allegorical function in representing the politics and effects of slavery. Then, I will discuss the intergenerational trauma of slavery as it relates to contemporary theory and its

representation in *Wild Seed*. In contrast to the former, the latter allows a specifically gendered perspective on the effects of intergenerational trauma.

On one hand, Doro, the antagonist of the novel, is a shapeshifter. He is neither white nor black, and he is neither a slaver nor a colonizer. Indeed, his character portrays multiple and highly ambiguous inflections. Allegorically, he embodies pseudo-scientific racism, racialized conceptions of the world; he is a supremacist of a different sort. In some ways, he portrays the embodiment of the very first colonizer, seen as the Western patriarchal master and African collaborator who controls and dominates his people by taking them away from their African land and bringing them as slaves to the United States of the Americas in order to proceed with his breeding experiments:

> Doro discovered the woman by accident when he went to see what was left of one of his seed villages … But Doro realized even before he reached it that its people were gone. Slavers had been to it before him. With their guns and their greed, they had undone in a few hours the work of a thousand years … and wondered where the survivors had been taken. Which country or New World colony?" (Butler 3).

This is the very first paragraph of the novel which presents the reader with Doro's journey back to Africa in 1690. The 'slavers' refers to the name of the slave ships, that is, the ships of slave traders—not colonizers—that took the African people onto the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas and then returned the profits to Europe. During their mission, they have decimated African villages and have captured, enslaved, dominated, and traded the survivors, forcing them, the 'slaves,' to serve their masters—the white colonizers—in the building of their Western land, described as 'the New World'. This quote does not refer to Doro as a Western colonizer even though, throughout the narrative, he does represent

the figure of a colonizer, coming from the 'New World' to find his seed villages—his kinsmen— then bringing them back to the Western land, becoming a master and proceeding with his own specific plans. Thus, Doro exploits, controls, and manipulates his kinsmen for the only purpose of breeding a race of people who have magical powers and abilities; by doing so, he removes the humanity of the people he creates, which was a crucial strategy of oppression of slavery. What is fundamental is that modernity cannot exist without coloniality. In fact, the history of Doro's reproductive colonies called 'seed villages' embodies the justifications of Western modernity. As Walter Mignolo explains, modernity came along with coloniality since America was not something that already existed or, needed to be discovered, but it was "invented, mapped, appropriated, and exploited under the banner of the Christian mission" (2011, 7). Thus, Doro's seed villages are seen as opportunities and means to continue and maintain slavery and colonialization. His project emerges as a dialectical challenge to traditional forms of supremacist race fantasies of white superiority as it parallels and challenges the modernity of white supremacy, privileging superpowered and empowered blackness over dominant whiteness.

Moreover, the fact that Doro is immortal and has colonized the world with his seed villages, and still continues to colonize and breed his people well into the nineteenth century, shows that colonialism is a well-established process that does not seem to have a timeframe with certain beginnings or endings. Doro's seed villages can be considered as a form of counter-colonialization. However, his project does not portray at all a better, more advanced way of life; indeed, it is as horrific and unacceptable as the white colonization's one. Thus, he embodies a critique of all sorts of essentialist fantasies of patriarchal and racial superiority, including those implied in, for example, the négritude movement.

On the other hand, Anyanwu represents the colonized African, victimized by her own people and Doro as she is taken from her African motherland to the New World known as the U.S, to be used as a slave and a breeder for Doro's plan:

> He had been asking himself which of his people she should be mated with first, but now he knew he would take her himself—for a while, at least. He often kept the most powerful of his people with him for a few months, perhaps a year. If they were children, they learned to obey him as master. If they were women, they accepted him best as lover or husband. Anyanwu was one of the handsomest women he had ever seen. He had intended to take her to bed this night, and many more nights until he got her to the seed village he was assembling in the British-ruled Colony of New York (Butler 21).

In her native language, Anyanwu's name signifies the sun (Butler 7). The sun[14] symbolizes life, power, strength, energy, a higher self which resonates with Butler's character portrayal of Anyanwu. Throughout the narrative, Anyanwu has to face Doro's orders and demands such as marrying him, bearing as many children as he needs, learning a new language, changing her attire, and so forth in order to protect her own people and the people she meets along the way to the New World. Her story illustrates the black women's struggle due to oppression of the patriarchal Western society. Being a woman of color, she must survive both gender and racial persecution, abuse, and domination. However, she is similar to Doro because she is also immortal. Unlike him, she does not use her powers to control or colonize, but as means to heal and protect people. As Doro's ability to exercise power

[14] In Aristotelean philosophy the sun is always masculine, the ruler of all starts and heaven; it works as a master trope and metaphysical metaphor (according to Derrida's reading in "White mythology). Thus, her name complicated binary gender divisions.

through body theft, not unlike a master exercising power over his slaves' bodies, enables him to take different physical appearances, coercing and terrorizing whomever he encounters. Being a shapeshifter allows him to survive the slave trade and being under the control of the Wester colonizer; through his multiple body theft, Doro maintains fear and control as anyone who tries to defy him could die in an instant. Thus, living in fear of being killed, the masters become in a way 'slaves' under Doro's authority.

As well, Anyanwu's ability to shapeshift into anything she desires is a means to survive a colonial patriarchal Western world. In his essay "The Dark Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options", Walter Mignolo states that, "colonial and imperial differences have also shaped patriarchal relations, since gender and sexual hierarchical relations very much depend, in the modern/colonial world, on racial classification" (2011, 17). In his text, he refers to 'the Colonial Matrix of Power', a world order, which is intersectional and thus works perfectly to explain the kind of modernity and present Butler narrates in her novel. Doro emotionally and morally coerces Anyanwu into becoming a part of a patriarchal system as he threatens to kill her children. Thus, as soon as Anyanwu accepts Doro's plan to continue breeding his people under colonialization, she unwillingly agrees to be part of a patriarchal system of control that dictates not only her ability to reproduce throughout centuries, but also with whomever Doro assigns her. Doro's breeding plan is a comparison to chattel slavery[15], in which women were 'bred' and their children taken from them and sold like cattle. Through the violent control of reproduction, chattel slavery counts as the most dehumanizing practice of labor extraction.

[15] For more information on chattel slavery, see classic writers Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) which are other novels written by African American women that address the violence and pain of chattel slavery.

Moreover, *Wild Seed* does not only portray aspects of colonialism and slavery. The evolution of Doro and Anyanwu's relationship throughout centuries suggests that at some point the narrative has shifted from colonialism to postcolonialism and that their story has entered a period in which colonialization does no longer exist. However, all along the narrative, Anyanwu remains the embodiment of westernization and a symbol of the metaphorical Third World of the post-colonial era. In fact, Anyanwu's language is Igbo, and she does not speak English at all the first time she encounters Doro:

> When he was near enough, he spoke to her, and his words made her frown in confusion. They were foreign words, completely incomprehensible to her, there was a strange familiarity to them—as though she should have understood … His words were clear to her now, though he had an accent that reminded her of the way people spoke long ago when she was truly young. She did not like it. Everything about him made her uneasy (Butler 6).

In this quote the notion of 'foreign words' goes beyond the many forms of native languages of Africa and highlights a language that can only be found in the Western world. Despite maintaining her African traditions throughout her life and having no knowledge of advanced technologies, the English language Doro speaks does not leave Anyanwu indifferent; this could be the result of the effects that westernization previously had on her homeland. Indeed, being an immortal, Anyanwu has witnessed the beginning of the colonialization where her own people was probably being forced to learn the colonizers' language, forced to change their cultural dress codes or even their religious beliefs. The fact that Doro's presence as well as the foreign language troubles her to the core, shows that the Western colonizers of her childhood have left a profound imprint mentally and

physically.

As the relationship between Doro and Anyanwu is portrayed as the one of a master/slaves, and/or colonizer/colonized dialectic, Doro takes on the responsibility to help and guide her. Indeed, from Doro's point of view, in order to blend in and integrate the New World's customs, Anyanwu has to be civilized, "I will give you land and seed and some of my people will help you learn the ways of your new home. You will continue to learn English and perhaps Dutch. You will live. But in exchange for what I give, you will obey me whether I come to you tomorrow or forty years from now" (Butler 72). Doro never leaves the role of oppressor/master. Even his 'help' is seen as a timeless demand under particular conditions and requests. His patriarchal desire to westernize Anyanwu shows that it is linked to colonialization, as she becomes Doro's property for breeding children with supernatural powers. The forced and controlled reproduction of women in *Wild Seed* parallels the patriarchal western control of reproduction in slavery and colonialization. Dehumanization, then westernization[16] of the African people shows that there is a black struggle for survival under the patriarchal colonialization of the Western society. Thus, in order to survive, Anyanwu has to adapt by learning English, dressing in suitable western clothes, and adjusting to western customs such as the ceremony of marriage as, "in your new country, if you wish to marry, you must pledge yourselves before a priest or a man of authority like Woodley" (Butler 65). Anyanwu, portrayed as the colonized slave, embodies a resource exploited by Doro, while being forced to live in a Western manner, as

[16] During the salve trade, it is more than westernization. In fact, African slaves were not really westernized but they were dehumanized. Colonized people were westernized because they had to be ruled and rule themselves through the values of the colonizers. However, slaves are part of an extraction/resource depletion economy. They were worked to death but not ruled; they were treated as animals and resources but not as people with rights and social structures. For more information on the subject, see Frantz Fanon's work on the construction of blackness through strategies of dehumanization.

modernization symbolizes the patriarchal Western world. Hence her question, "and tell me the world you used before: Civilization. What is civilization?" (Butler 101). In this passage of the novel, at the beginning of the journey to the New World, Anyanwu asks Doro's son Isaac to explain the word civilization that he has used before. Isaac response can be seen as very subjective as he states:

> Before you were Anyanwu … mother of I-don't-know-how-many children, priestess to your people, respected and valued woman of your town. But to the people here, you would be savage, almost an animal if they saw you wearing only your cloth. Civilization is the way one's own people live. Savagery is the way foreigners live (Butler 110).

If Isaac's explanation was formulated the other way around, slavers and colonizers living in Africa would be seen as foreigners and savages to the African people. Thus, in the novel and even in today's world, Civilization remains very subjective. Therefore, by constructing a cohesion between the patriarchal projects of the West and the creation of Doro's colonial project of seed villages, Butler depicts the result of his experiments which surprisingly does not restore freedom to black people, nor to the humanity in general. Through the history of Doro's experiment and its disastrous aftermath, and by portraying the constant conflict between the patriarchal Western colonizer and its westernization of the colonized African people, Butler retells an African story and an Afrocentric history[17] that serves as a strongly

[17] In this context, it is Afrocentric history as the story foregrounds the impossibility of essentialist narratives through the rupture of slavery and the subsequent dissolution of binary concepts such as tradition and modernity. At the least, this rupture created a black U.S-American modernity marked by what Du Bois famously called 'the black double consciousness'.

anti-colonialist provocation. As a result, this provocation leads to the exposure of intergenerational trauma of slavery.

When writing about the history of slave narratives, retracing a universal truth might seem far from controversial as the personal experience of someone can depend on endless variations of stories. In his theory of the postmodern slave narrative, Mark Steinberg explains that:

> Butler points to ways in which past and present become interchangeable. She also writes of plausible historical actions and relationships, 'filling in' possible gaps that may be evident in classic slave narratives. Butler assumes a non-western conceptualization of history—one in which history is cyclical, not linear—in order to demonstrate ways in which certain forms of race and gender oppression continue late into twentieth century and beyond. She incorporates postmodern fiction literary techniques to critique the notion that historical and psychological slavery can be overcome (2004, 467).

Being of African descent and raised in the midst of racial segregation in the U.S, Butler writes about particular historical events that directly affected her in some ways; she used her background and resources to write and publish historical texts through science fiction, making her part of the caretakers of recorded memories. Through *Wild Seed*, Butler insists on narrating the intergenerational trauma of slavery as she conveys historical slavery events and its negative consequences which have affected the generations of Anyanwu's family for centuries. Indeed, the story takes place in 1690 with the capture and sale of Africans by

the European slave traders, and ends centuries later, in 1840 with the depiction of slavery and plantation life in the U.S. Anyanwu has lived throughout those centuries, and watched her relatives come and go. With each generation, she passes on the history of the slave trade; she explains to each new generation how she arrived in the New World and reiterates her struggle for survival through the oppression and the colonialization of the patriarchal Western society.

From my Western privileged position, as a non-black person, I have often naively wondered how after over a century later, slavery could still profoundly affect the African American community. Indeed, African Americans often disagree with anything that retells the history of slavery. Indeed, some mediums—such as TV series or movies—are usually very controversial. From the mid-twentieth century until nowadays, the cinematographic western imagination and most precisely, the Hollywood movie industry of the U.S did not quite portray the authenticity of the slaves' stories; often the history of slavery is told from a white western perspective which leads to cultural appropriation. Thus, this appropriation undermines, diminishes, and takes away the power of African Americans' voices. For instance, in the 1939 classic movie *Gone with the Wind,* slaves were characterized as happy, jovial, often meek, and in a very blatant and demeaning stereotypes. In 2012, decades later, the revisionist Western movie *Django Unchained*[18] seems to make a mockery of a very awful and painful history through its highly-stylized, heavily-caricatural, and overly-exaggerated portrayal of slavery. In an interview for "BBC Culture", Dexter

[18] This movie drives home the brutality and dehumanizing practices of slavery. As it is a Tarantino movie, it is fantastic and exaggerated which can be paralleled to Doro as he is an exaggerated 'breeder of black superpower'. Even if I do not think that authenticity should be a criterium through which to judge the representation of history, specifically if this history's presence depends on its narrativity, I do believe that in some way over-exaggeration creates and gives an aesthetic form of the portrayal of slavery in the U.S.

Gabriel, a professor who teaches a class on slavery in cinema at George Mason University explains that, "in 'Django' what we got was a very fantastical version of slavery based much more on modern notions of black masculinity and swagger than anything that has to do with the slave experience"[19]. These two Western movies, reflecting just a couple of examples out of hundreds, underscore the complex issues of retelling historical events in its true form without fully romanticizing it, or dramatizing it.

Thus, looking for a better understanding of today's generation of African Americans and their apprehensions towards the mediums that retell the history of slavery, I discovered that psychiatrist Dr. Rachel Yehuda's important study of epigenetics and the intergenerational transmission of trauma[20]. She shows that dramatic incidents of trauma can be passed on through generations in shared family genes, meaning that when people experience trauma, it changes their genes in a very specific and noticeable way. Therefore, when they have children, their genes are transmitted onto their children who then, inherit the genes affected by trauma.

Moreover, in his theory of cultural trauma, Ron Eyerman argues that, "the trauma in question is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (2001, 1). Writing a modern slave narrative to reconstruct slavery through the recollections of former slaves—as Anyanwu, still living on the plantation, taking the shape of a white master—is a means for Butler to emphasize the origins of a distinctive African-American aesthetics, and to re-

[19] For more explanations regarding slavery in movies and series, see news article of BBC Culture "Slavery on Film: What is Hollywood's problem?" (Website at https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20131015-hollywood-scared-of-slavery ).

[20] The classical place to begin with is Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel. Theories* of the Transgenerational Phantom (1994). Though it was first published in a series of essays in 1975.

establish slavery as the primary focus of the black struggle towards identity. In fact, the various effects of slavery, intergenerationally transmitted, metamorphose into various forms of experienced and continuous violence[21] that can be tracked through the Jim Crow period, police brutality and black incarceration, to the present Black-Lives-Matter movement. By writing about the effects of the slave trade and the African diaspora in the U.S, Butler explores in a way the formation of the African American identity through the cultural and intergenerational trauma of slavery. As Eyerman explains, "slavery was traumatic in retrospect and created a 'primal scene' in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been salves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa" (2001, 3). Thus, he argues that trauma can be experienced in many different ways and not only through the survival of slavery. Butler, then, through the protagonist of Anyanwu, recollects that trauma using slave narratives to help form the root of a collective memory as means to develop a collective identity among the African American black communities of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Eyerman states, "a reflective process, trauma links past to present through representations and imagination" (2001, 3). For instance, as a child, Butler was interested in science fiction magazines which led her, later in life, to use the science fiction genre to write and shed light on historical events of the slave trade. In *Wild Seed,* she interweaves the creation story with a visionary narrative of slavery in the New World.

Eyerman further explains that experiences are often the product of mass medias, such as magazines, newspapers, radio, and so forth, which can form a 'selective

[21] For more discussions on black trauma and violence see the work of Paul Gilroy, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall and Christina Sharpe. When it comes to trauma studies and race/colonialism, see the work of Michael Rothberg and Ranjana Khanna.

construction and representation' of events. In other words, how can we be assured that the history is transmitted in its true authenticity[22]? Even with all the accumulated archives over the centuries, history can be subjective as it is nearly impossible to recollect with complete accuracy each historical event in detail. Thus, when using different narrative media to describe and analyze a specific moment of history, one must be either well-informed through research, have a profound knowledge of the event in question, or write from past or present personal experiences.

In his essay "African Modes of Self-Writing", Achille Mbembe seems to question the role that collective memory played in retelling the events that led to slavery. He argues that the question has to do with "the work of memory, with the function of forgetting, and with the modalities of reparation" (19). He points out two reasons that make the conscious recollection of slavery complex. In his first example, he states that, "between the African-Americans' memory of slavery and that of continental Africans, there is a shadowy zone that conceals a deep silence: the silence of guilt and the refusal of Africans to face up to the troubling aspect of the crime that directly engages their own responsibility" (20). In fact, he 'blames' the continental African people for not taking responsibility for helping slavery gradually prosper in Africa. While agreeing that "the fate of black slave in modernity is not the solely result of the tyrannical will and cruelty of the Other—even though the latter is well-established", he denounces the role that continental Africans played in their own fate by stating that, "the other primitive signifier is the murder of brother by brother, 'the elision of the first syllable of the family name' (Lacan), in short,

[22] Here I question an existential issue. If I turn to classical trauma theory, it could demonstrate that the question is inadequate; trauma can never be authentic because it is inscribed after the fact, through narrative. For more information about theories on trauma, see Cathy Caruth's work and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's work.

the divided city" (20). From his point of view, the horror of slavery in Africa and the United States of America is not the same. He states, "it is this distance that prevents the trauma, the absence, and the loss from ever being the same on the two sides of the Atlantic" (20). Mbembe's second reason for the complexity of conscious recollection is that, "in certain parts of the New World, the memory of slavery is consciously repressed by the descendants of African slaves" (20). From his point of view, the tragic events of the past are not represented and spoken into the present which creates a form of denial. He further argues that:

> Because it is denied, this tragedy can never produce, by itself, any law or foundation. To be sure, this denial is not equivalent to forgetting as such. It is simultaneously a refusal to acknowledge one's ancestry and a refusal to remember an act that arouses feelings of shame. Under such conditions, the priority is not really to re-establish contact with oneself and with one's origins. Neither it is a question of restoring a full and positive relationship to oneself, since this self has been humiliated beyond any limit" (20-21).

However, from my point of view, his theory does not seem to apply to Butler's Afrofuturistic narratives. Indeed, in an effort to enlighten and build a collective memory, Butler, through her work, tries to re-establish an historical truth behind the gloomy past of slavery, as well as one regarding the epistemological and economic logic of slavery[23]. In *Wild Seed*, she provides two versions of the slave trade: the first version happens in continental Africa where Doro encounters some Africans who are helping with the capture

[23] For more detailed information, see Achille Mbembe's book *Critique of Black Reason* (2013).

of their own people in order to sale and trade them to the slave traders. The other one is set in the New World, where Anyanwu is forced to live in Doro's seed villages, becoming his property and experiencing chattel slavery; she is no longer free as she must obey him at all times, bear his children, and work on the building of the plantation. Therefore, in the theory of intergenerational trauma, the way slavery is represented in literature is essential to the construction and reworking of collective memory and collective identity by the generations which followed the emancipation and the official end of segregation in the U.S.

Furthermore, the Middle Passage is a very important historical event which still remains prominent in today's intergenerational memory of slavery. The slave trade is known as the triangular trade in which millions of Africans were deported to the New World as part of the Atlantic slave trade. According to Karen Bell, it was seen as a 'time of in-betweenness for those being traded from Africa to America. The close quarters and intentional division of pre-established African communities by the ship crew motivated captive Africans to forge bonds of kinship which then created forced transatlantic communities" (158). In *Wild Seed,* as in other of her works[24], Octavia Butler depicts the slave trade through the middle passage motif, as it is the most elaborate structure in the architecture of the novel. *Wild Seed* "Book I: The Covenant", introduces Anyanwu and Doro and narrates their journey on board of a slave ship to North America. Butler chooses science fiction to revisit the 'slave narrative'[25] which in some ways alter its genre. In fact,

[24] Other novels by Octavia Butler include the Patternist series: *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), and *Clay's Ark* (1984). In the Xenogenesis trilogy: *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989) and acclaimed novel *Kindred* (1979). In the Parable series: *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Later novel *Fledgling* (2005). Octavia Butler's short stories include "Near of Kin" (1979), "Speech Sounds" (1983), "Bloodchild" (1984), "Amnesty" (2003), and "The Book of Martha" (2003).

[25] The 'slave narrative' refers to a particular genre of writing. See Henri Louis Jr.'s *The Classic Slave Narrative* and Fredrick Douglass's slave narrative of *The History of Mary Prince*. It was Toni Morrison's

the slave narratives were written for a white abolitionist audience, whereas Afrofuturism is written for an African American and global audience; it is concerned with the dystopian or utopian continuities of time. Through the slave narrative of her protagonists, Butler retraces the long, harsh, horrible, sometimes deadly conditions of such a journey towards the New World:

> On deck, [Anyanwu] found wind and rain more violent than she had imagined. There were blue-white flares of lighting followed by absolute blackness. Great waves sept the deck and would surely have washed her overboard, but for her speed and strength. She held on, adjusting her eyes as quickly as she could. There was always a little light, even when ordinary vision perceived nothing. Finally, she could see—and she could hear above the wind and rain and waves. Fragments of desperate English reached her, and she longed to understand. But if the words were meaningless, there was no mistaking the tones. These people thought they might die soon (Butler 76).

By using the speculative form, science fiction, Butler portrays historical details of the slave trade journey to understand the multi-temporal dimensions of the slave trade as its effects reach into and shape the future. Indeed, it shed light on the narrative constitution of African diasporic memory, which throughout centuries has been transmitted to the generations of African American citizens. In fact, science fiction allows the reader to think about the ways people interact with each other, with technology, and with the environment as seen in Butler's Afrofuturistic narrative:

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*Beloved* that first thematized a specifically female version of the modern slave narrative that articulated the formerly 'unspeakable' (i.e., unspeakable sexual and physical forms of violence and trauma enacted on the female slave body).

> The wind blew harder … But still, Isaac stood alone, not even holding on with his hands, and utterly indifferent to wind and waves. The ship seemed to be moving faster. Anyanwu felt increased pressure from the wind, felt her body lashed so hard by the rain that she tried to curl away from it against the crewman's body. It seemed that the ship was sailing against the wind, moving like a spirit-thing, raising waves of its own … Then, gradually, the cloud cover broke, and there were stars. There was a full moon reflecting fragmented light off calm waters. The waves had become gentle and lapped harmlessly at the ship, and the wind became no more than a cold breeze against Anyanwu's wet, nearly naked body (77).

In this quote, Anyanwu, still on board the ship and on her way to the New World, witnesses for the first time the superpower of Isaac, one of Doro's first children. With his strength and power, Isaac is able to keep the ship in one piece while getting through the storm. While the white crewmen barely hang on to life, it is Isaac, the White/Black/Indian man who comes to their rescue and saves their lives. Often in Western literary narratives, the slave trade of the Middle Passage portrays white men as saviors with the one purpose of 'civilizing' and dominating black people. However, in this passage of *Wild Seed*, through the supernatural effects, Butler revises history and reinstates the power to the Africans. As Anderson and Jones explain, "Afrofuturism has become the umbrella term for considering how science fiction, fantasy, and technology can be used to imagine and reimagine lost pasts and new futures for alienated, black others" (11). Thus, even if Butler never experienced the middle passage, or slavery for that matter, the cultural trauma was passed on to her, being a descendent of Africans, and retransmitted through her work as means to reclaim history—and in a way to start the healing process. In fact, Eyerman states:

> Resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual stories meld through forms and processes of collective representation… its recollection is mediated through narratives that are modifies with the passage of time, filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations, which represent the past in the present. Whether or not they directly experienced slavery, or even had ancestors who did, blacks in the United States were identified with and came to identify themselves through the memory and representation of slavery (2001, 14).

Therefore, through literature, and particularly in *Wild Seed,* Butler exposes the intergenerational trauma of slavery, which also involves the objectification of black bodies, most starkly represented in the listing of slaves as "cargo" and the selling of slaves on auction blocks and during public auctions.

One aspect that the westernization of Africans in the eighteenth century created was the objectification and commodification of black bodies, in which the institution of slavery[26], not only displaced millions of Africans across the globe, but also built the foundation for the commodification and dehumanization of the black body that is still, in some ways, happening centuries later[27]. In fact, back in the eighteenth century, white slave owners would use their presumed right under the commodification and objectification of

[26] For more information on the beginning of slavery in the U.S and the dehumanization of black bodies see Cecil J. Hunt II's essay "Feeding the Machine: The Commodification of Black Bodies form Slavery to Mass Incarceration" (Website at https://racism.org/articles/citizenship-rights/slavery-to-reparations/8719-feeding-the-machine ).

[27] See for example, the racialization of the prison industry in the U.S, https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-prison-industry-in-the-united-states-big-business-or-a-new-form-of-slavery/8289

the black body to abuse mentally and sexually their slaves. Economical, political, social, and religious factors created the commodification of black bodies. As a result, black bodies were forced to become obedient subjects—extractable resources—under the command of white men. This is not absolute, at least not in Butler's work. In fact, Butler depicts resistance, another important theme of *Wild Seed*, as throughout the novel Anyanwu resists Doro. Also, resistance is seen as a legacy in the history of slavery. In *Wild Seed,* the black body rendered as an object by slavers, is used in many different ways. It is used as a commodity in the African trade market, and for the reproduction and breeding of a new 'hybrid' human species. It is also used for economic reasons with the forced labor in the New World's plantations. Despite the fact that Doro does not compare himself to the white slave masters, as his main plan is to find his kinsmen in African and bring them to the U.S for his experiences, he is still the embodiment of the institution of slavery, making him a master of slaves, "my people only buy and sell slaves" (Butler 46). The market of trading slaves represents a force in which black bodies are constructed as commodities. Stephanie Smallwood argues that the voluntary, premeditated violence of a well-established system enabled its exploitation throughout slavery:

> The most powerful instrument locking captives in, as commodities for Atlantic trade, was the culture of the market itself … buying people who had no evident social value was not a violation or an act of questionable morality, but rather a keen and appropriate response to opportunity, for this way precisely what one was supposed to do in the market (2007, 56-62).

Indeed, the capture, buying, and trading of African slaves, allowed the formation of a social structure that paralleled the value of human life with the one of the markets. As soon as the

market stopped fulfilling its basic purpose—the sale of goods—and started to trade human lives, slave labor was transformed, and new social structures of exploitation emerged. Thus, the market became a structural system of oppression where the dehumanization and objectification of bodies occurred and continued well into the future.

In *Wild Seed*, the use of the slave market in Africa represents an opportunity for Doro to continue the search of his kinsmen, "I can't stop the trade even where it might touch people, but I can control it" (Butler 51). Doro does not treat his slaves the same way white masters do, as for instance he allows them to marry which is a custom that was denied to enslaved people. However, he uses the black body as a commodity to reproduce hybrid children, "if you come with me, I think someday, I can show you children you will never have to bury" (Butler 23). During the eighteenth century, the commodification of the black body enabled the objectification and sexual abuse of the black female body. The female black body becomes a commodity, a resource for bearing children, but also an object of sexual violation enforced by the masters. In order to protect her family and her people, Anyanwu is coerced into providing her body for reproduction and sexual desires. Thus, she is forced to make decisions that compromise her personal integrity. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argues that:

> The black female body is a useful body because it is both a laboring, sexual, and reproducing body and therefore it was necessary to preserve the health of the enslaved woman. The use of violence was therefore necessary to break them in, to fragment them, to destabilize them and to make them cease to be subjects, to transform them into 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977) that became bodies that labor (1999, 318).

Doro does not use physical violence towards Anyanwu, but he uses words with a violence that frightens her. He is a mind controller, as he tells her disturbing things and constantly threatens her to kill if she does not obey his rules, "you have left your village, Anyanwu, and your town and your land and you people. You are here where I rule. Here, there is only one abomination: disobedience. You will obey" (Butler 130). In order to keep her in place, mental torture and physical threats towards others becomes a means to use the black body as an object. As Yusuf states, "the purpose of torture during slavery was not to destroy, but to deconstruct the world of the body in pain. Torture is an imitation of death 'a sensory equivalent, substituting prolonged mock execution for execution' (Scarry, 1985, 27), an externalized violation of the body and the psyche" (1999, 318).

Lastly, the use of the black body is seen as an economic commodity through forced labor in the United States plantations. Mining the land of the black body is a business, and a means of production for the slaves' masters and owners of the U.S plantations:

> Giplin was the name given to the settlement sixty years before by its first European settlers … but the English settlers whom Doro had begun bringing in well before the 1664 British takeover had renamed the village Wheatley, wheat being its main crop, and Wheatley being the name of the English family whose leadership Doro had supported … all were either good breeding stock or, like the Wheatleys, served other useful purposes (Butler 113).

By using African slaves to expand Doro's plantation, and to reproduce hybrid humans, black bodies are mined, extracted, and violated the same way the extraction of resources for economic purposes violates the lands. Yusuf states, "the violent subjection of the slaves was a way of transforming their bodies into an entity that could produce and reproduce the

property necessary for accumulating wealth" (1999, 318). Thus, her theory demonstrates that under the slave economy and colonialism, physical brutality and forced labor transformed the African black body into a commodity, in which its freed body becomes an owned and captive one. The institution of slavery embodies the objectification of black bodies as an economic commodity through the trading market, the reproduction of slaves, as well as the forced labor on the plantations. Therefore, the slave's body, and the body in general is indispensable in understanding how identity is formed and organized in Butler's fiction. The question of just what constitutes a body, especially the human body, and its meanings is raised through the institution of slavery.

Furthermore, in *Wild Seed*, Butler challenges the notion of identity through the representation of Anyanwu as her character embodies the resistance of the black female body. Thus, in the second chapter, I will examine the role that female identity and Black female identity plays in Butler's Afrofuturist narrative.

# Chapter Two

**Black Female Subjectivity: Embodiment, resistance, and animality in *Wild Seed***

"I write for those women who do not speak,
for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified,
because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves.
We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't."
—Audre Lorde

The previous chapter explored the ways in which *Wild Seed* first establishes the black struggle for freedom. Through the historical events of slavery and racialized embodiment, Octavia Butler's Afrofuturist narrative challenges conventional fantasies of race. Through the use of black counter-cultural practises and modes of production, the Afrofuturist genre resists a constructed racist narrative around the dichotomy of the white and black race portrayed in Africa, as well as in the United States. In her essay, Linda Martin Alcoff states that "identity is today a growth industry in the academy, across the humanities and social sciences, influencing even law and communication studies. The constitutive power of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other forms of identity has, finally, suddenly, been recognized as a relevant aspect of almost all projects of inquiry" (313). Contrary to Afrofuturism, classic science fiction narrative plays with different notions of identity, usually regarded as a fixed race, in order to make the reader think and question what it means to be human. In an interview for "The Black Scholar", Butler

explains that, from her point of view, science fiction is mostly "the freest genre in existence" but that it "tends to be limited by what people think should be done with it and by what editors think should be done with it" (1986, 14). In other words, Butler's opinion explains the controversy in which science fiction was only reserved for a privileged white male dominated genre, excluding women or Black people, let alone Black women[28]. However, in contemporary science fiction and Afrofuturist narratives written by female writers, the notion of identity is a medium to examine the real-world inequalities—gender, gender roles, and beliefs about gender—through the lens of female identity. Alcoff explores the problems around the notion of identity as she points out:

> Many theorists express a worry that the very concept of identity involves domination because it presumes sameness, thus excluding difference and because it presumes some haecceity, or essential core … if the genealogy of identity is based on something like the concept of linked fate … then it looks as if identity is something created by oppression that our goal should be to dismantle rather than celebrate or build a politics around (318-319).

Thus, in her theory she emphasizes the forms of identity and how identity is constructed through subjectivity, power, and domination in an established patriarchal society. Through the speculative fiction, Butler challenges gender social norms and its conceptions, as she explores alternative modes for societies and characters, and different beliefs around gender roles. Through the use of space and temporality as a process to understand and connect the issues of embodiment and gender identity, and the use of female identity and black female

[28] In the interview, Butler further explains the role that the Women's and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s had on her career as it built up her confidence to start writing about a genre that mostly ostracized writers and readers like her.

identity, Butler breaks a universal perception that the role of female characters have in science fiction—being dominated by a binary stereotype of the damsel in distress or the villain. Instead, she depicts smart, adventurous, skilled, and highly resourceful heroines. In fact, in her essay "Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine", Ruth Salvaggio argues that:

> In a sense, Octavia Butler's science fiction is a part of that new scenario, featuring strong female protagonists who shape the course of social events. Yet in another sense, what Butler has to offer is something very different. Her heroines are black women who inhabit racially mixed societies. Inevitably, the situations these women confront involve the dynamic interplay of race and sex in futuristic worlds (78).

Thus, through black female subjectivity in Afrofuturist narrative, Butler challenges and questions what signifies being a woman and a black woman in a male dominated world.

In *Wild Seed*, Butler empowers Anyanwu, the black female character, by giving her a voice to resist Doro's demands and reclaim her identity. However, the novel's Afrofuturist narrative and Anyanwu's character challenge identity and its limits as a medium of resistance against patriarchal oppression. I will first talk about the main female character, Anyanwu as she embodies both African womanhood and a cyborg identity in order to survive. Then, I will discuss Anyanwu as the black female embodiment of resistance as she defies Doro's fearful authority. To her, resistance is a means to reclaim her own female body and identity living under Western colonization. Finally, I will examine Anyanwu's animality, being a representation of her cyborg identity.

In *Wild Seed*, Octavia Butler uses black female subjectivity to re-imagine and re-situate black womanhood identity within a Western patriarchal society. Indeed, *Wild Seed* was published at a time where strong black female protagonists were virtually non-existent outside of Butler's novel (Salvaggio, 78-81). Anyanwu, the female protagonist, embodies African womanhood and is the focal point of the narrative. Butler describes Anyanwu as the mother of Africa, for "she was an oracle. A woman through whom a god spoke. Strangers paid heavily for her services" (5). She is a black woman living in Africa with genetic mutations that make her immortal and give her outstanding physical strength. Though living on the outskirts of her village, she remains the mother and caretaker of her people, seeing as a mystical being who protects her own people and herself through her magical abilities. Being a strong black woman, Anyanwu represents the embodiment of independence. Indeed, as a free and self-sufficient woman in Africa, she takes charge of her own life and she does not let her female identity be oppressed and controlled by the enforced norms of a patriarchal society, for "she had even found difficult to be a good wife in her most recent years because of the way a woman must bow her head and be subject to her husband. It was better to be as she was—a priestess who spoke with the voice of a god and was feared and obeyed. But what was that? She had become a kind of master herself" (Butler, 9-10). By creating the powerful character of Anyanwu, Butler's portrayal superseded stereotypes of women in the science fiction genre as "autonomous, independent women are not often found in the kind of science fiction[29]" (Deman 8). Through black female subjectivity, Butler empowers Anyanwu to embrace her womanhood and her black womanhood as part of her identity formation. In fact, in her essay "Butler, Octavia (1947-

[29] Here Andrew Deman refers to the kind of science fiction that Ursula K. LeGuin attacks in "American SF and the Other" (1979).

)", Lisbeth Gant-Britton further describes Anyanwu as "prime example of the kind of heroines Butler depicts. Strong-willed, physically capable and usually endowed with some extra mental or emotional ability… they nonetheless must endure brutally harsh conditions as they attempt to exercise some degrees of agency" (95-100).

Moreover, Afrofuturist narrative dramatizes black female subjectivity to re-imagine, re-claim, and re-situate black female identity. They also tend to re-imagine and re-situate the female body and black female body within and outside established gender roles in a male dominated discourse, as, for instance, "the character of Anyanwu defamiliarizes the construction of women in science fiction" (Deman, 8). In fact, the body cannot be separated from one-self, as it is an important part of everyone's self-identity[30]. In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu's body, depicted as complex and ambivalent, is more than just a body as it represents a cyborg identity. Hampton states, "although all of Anyanwu's abilities may not be common in the either African or African-American oral traditions, root workers and witches have been known to show up on occasion. It is on the basis of these elements that Butler manages to produce such identifiable characters with such complicated bodies" (40). For more than three hundred years, Anyanwu has developed and enhanced her body's abilities. Through space and time, her body has been her ally, being able to overcome different situations and various obstacles in order to survive Doro's control. Elizabeth Grosz argues that "the exploration of conceptions of space of time as necessary correlates of the exploration of corporeality" (84). Anyanwu embodies the maternal instinct who protects and cares for her family and village. As Dubey argues, "Butler's presentation of Anyanwu's magic and witchery is consistent with the tradition

[30] See Tony M. Calasenti and Kathleen L. Slevin's *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging* for Feminist perspectives on identity and image.

within women's speculative fiction that seeks to undermine hard-and-fast distinctions between (female) magic and (male) science and to elaborate an alternative feminist epistemology grounded in empathy and embodiment" (36). One of Anyanwu's magical abilities is the power of healing. Unlike Doro, she values the importance of helping others out of pure love, not as a means of entertainment or a chase for power. The circular notion of time helps to understand how Anyanwu's immortality has constructed her identity over the years, becoming a strong powerful black woman. Even Doro wonders about her capacity to evolve and resist over time: "he smiled a little but could not help wondering how hard it might be to tame even partially a wild seed woman who had been helping herself for three hundred year" (Butler 20). In fact, when she lives in Africa, Anyanwu uses her body and her mind to heal her people. By doing so, she gains their trust and respect, which assures her tranquility and freedom. Years later, when she is taken to the New World, her body's ability to heal must adapt and assimilate her new Western culture:

> There, she discovered that her body had reacted badly to one specific food—a rich sweet that she knew no name for, but that she has loved … Now, as she lays still, analyzing, learning not only which food had made her ill, but which ingredient in that food, she was comfortably aware of Doro nearby … 'Have you healed yourself?' he asked. 'Yes. But with so much food, it took me a long time to learn what was making me sick.' 'Do you have to know?' 'Of course. How can I know what to do for healing until I know what healing is needed and why? I think I knew all the diseases and poisons of my people. I must learn the ones here" (Butler 126-127).

Through the notion of space and time, Butler emphasizes how time helps the construction of the body and how, through a structural space, it affects identity formation—in that case being a slave woman living under Western colonization.

Besides healing, Anyanwu's other very important feature is the power to shapeshift into anything her mind and body desire. The first time she encounters Doro, her body reflects the appearance of an old Lady. Her choice of not being a younger version of her true self is a means to show her people that her identity—described as a witch—poses no threat and "when she realized the years had ceased to mark her body, she experimented and learned to age herself as her husband aged. She learned quickly that it was not good to be too different. Great differences caused envy, suspicion, fear, charges of witchcraft" (Butler 58). When she transforms into a beautiful young woman, she alters her body to please Doro and to respond to a social demand and construction that a woman can only be attractive when she possesses a young body.

However, through body altering, Butler shows that identity is not just fixed, but rather fluid. Indeed, Anyanwu uses shapeshifting to constantly adapt and fit a gender ideal—a male identity—to survive patriarchal oppression "people will think before they attack a man—even a small one. And they will not become as angry if a man gives them a beating. He had laughed, but he knew she was right. She was somewhat safer as a man, although here, among African and European slavers, no one was truly safe" (41). In fact, Anyanwu, originally a black woman, takes the shape of a white male to hide her identity. As Adwoa Afful argues, "Anyanwu exists in speculative temporal space, and the new identities that she chooses or is forced to take on in turn become technologies of race, gender and sexuality at her disposal not only to navigate her relationship with Doro, but to

contend with her new subjected status and the racial rubrics of her new environment" (567). During the plantation years, in order to be respected and to blend with the rest of the Western colonizers, she alters her identity as means to survive slavery. After centuries of being controlled by Doro, her new body allows her to live her life and escape his oppression. Catherine Ramirez points out that "undeniably, Butler uses science fiction to scrutinize power relations (i.e., social hierarchies based on race, gender, and sexuality), and to explore ways of subverting and/or destroying power without replacing or reproducing it" (378). In other words, just as she constructs her identity as a healer to feel a sense of belonging among her African community, she likewise constructs an identity through the body of a white male for the sake of survival in the New World.

However, altering her identity comes with its own limits. Indeed, Anyanwu shows her personal boundaries in the form of rejection. In fact, no matter what shape or form she takes, no matter what type of hierarchies governs her, she always, ultimately transforms back to her own true self and "for a moment he could only stare at her. 'Is this truly you, Anyanwu?' 'As I am. As I would be if I did not age or change myself for others. This shape flows back to me very easily. Others are harder to take'"(Butler 16). By empowering and altering Anyanwu's black female body, Butler demonstrates the reason driving the shifting positions of her identity. As Deman states:

> Anyanwu is able to construct herself, a process which is naturally empowering, but at the same time, the desire to return to a home state, a real identity that transcends the physical—yet still powerfully lined to the physical—is overwhelming. What Butler expresses here is the notion of identity, beyond construction, be it the construction of others, or self-construction. Anyanwu's

> greatest change over the course of the novel is neither to bird, nor dolphin, nor to potent human male. Rather, her greatest change is her internal growth, the movement towards understanding that ultimately empowers her at the end of the novel, giving her the one and only opportunity to manipulate Doro and take power (13).

Therefore, Butler dramatizes black female subjectivity as she uses the magical tropes of Afrofuturism to reinvent and reclaim female identity. By emphasizing the fluidity of identity, Butler exposes the black and female struggle as "in Anyanwu, we find a woman who –despite her imprisonment by a patriarchal tyrant—learns to use her abilities to survive" (Salvaggio, 81).

In *Rewriting the Narrative*, theorists David Deluliis and Jeff Lohr argue that "[Yancey] proposes positive resistance in the form of 'decoding' as a process of recoding Black embodied existence through processes of opposition and affirmation. By promoting a visible and necessary black presence in the future, Afrofuturism is one form of resistance that escapes tendencies to problematize or victimize blackness" (176-177). Indeed, Butler's Afrofuturist narrative emphasizes different forms of gendered resistance though the black female body. In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu represents the embodiment of resistance as she defies Doro's relentless oppression and control. The first time she uses resistance occurs when Anyanwu encounters Doro in Africa and refuses to follow him, nor marry him: "everything comes back to that. I am content here, Doro. I have already had ten husbands to tell me what to do. Why should I make you the eleventh? Because you will kill me if I refuse? Is that how men get wives in your homeland—by threatening murder? Well, perhaps you

cannot kill me. Perhaps we should find out!" (Butler, 21). Anyanwu is portrayed as strong, independent, powerful—yet compassionate, even dangerous—yet merciful woman. Anyanwu own physical features underscore her praised qualities. Yet, the lack of caring whether she lives or dies changes her psychological constitution as Doro threatens her beloved children and her community in Africa. To save her loved ones, she sacrifices her own identity as she compromises to become Doro's wife and follows him to the New World. However, Doro's empty promises—marrying Anyanwu and conceiving children with her—enable Anyanwu to defy his control. Thus, she never really becomes a submissive woman in the patriarchal society of the New World.

Moreover, Anyanwu resists by rejecting to adopt Western culture. When she arrives as a colonized African woman, Doro orders her to dress in proper Western attire, as well as the necessity to learn the English language. At first, Anyanwu seems curious and willing to make an effort. But she quickly realizes that learning and assimilating a new culture has limitations when certain food items or certain English words highlight the difficult task of losing oneself and one's culture: "you know you must change to suit the customs here. You have not lived three hundred years without leaning to accept new customs" (Butler 127). Anyanwu's resistance poses complication for her oppressor as "in spite of Doro's fascination with her, his first inclination was to kill her. He was not in the habit of keeping alive people he could not control absolutely" (96). Doro's ego, greed, and unapologetic murders force Anyanwu to resist him; his own behavior will cause later his own downfall.

In Butler's novels, the marriage pattern is often used as a means to show how the colonized African were westernized and forced to assimilate the New World's culture under colonization. In his essay "Necropolitics", Achille Mbembe argues that "slavery is

one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation in that the slaves' condition represents a triple loss, of home, bodily agency, and political status, this reducing the humanity of the slaves to that mere shadow figures" (2003, 21). Indeed, Anyanwu, coerced into captivity, breeding, and marriage—with Doro or other white or black men, tries to compromise. Over the years, she attempts to recreate a version of her former life wherever she travels to, building alternative kindship networks and families. Adwoa Afull explains that "establishing new homes, by staying put for as long as possible, in Anyanwu's case becomes a form of gendered resistance" (565). Indeed, fifty years after living in the New World colony, Anyanwu, though somewhat well-assimilated to her new culture, still resists through the representation of her home, her personal belongings, and culinary skills. In fact, she incorporates or fuses her African culture with her Western one:

> Doro looked up at the portrait of Anyanwu on the wall opposite the high, shallow fireplace. The style of the house was English here, Dutch there, Igbo somewhere else. Anyanwu had made earthen pots, variations of those she had once sold in the marketplaces of her homeland, and stout handsome baskets. People bough them from her and placed them around their houses as she had. Her work was both decorative and utilitarian, and here in her house with its Dutch fireplace and kas, its English settle and thronelike wainscot chairs, it evoked memories of a land she would not see again (Butler 152).

Moreover, Butler uses the black female body of Anyanwu as a means to resist Doro and patriarchal oppression. Resistance becomes a means to an end to survive and defy death. In *Changing Bodies*, Hampton states that "identities attached to the body are highly unstable notions that are subject to ambiguity and variation in different social situations"

(25). The eponymous title "Wild Seed" represents the central character Anyanwu as "'wild seed' which is the name that Doro gives to all of his human acquisitions, beings with unique abilities, including Anyanwu's shapeshifting and healing powers to Thomas' psychic abilities. Doro cultivates human beings with specific genetic abilities as a farmer might experience with wild seeds. He cross-pollinates them to "create new varieties of super beings" (Afull, 567). Not unlike pseudo-scientific racists and fascist doctors, such as Joseph Mengele[31] as he conducted human experiments on Africans and enslaved and incarcerated people. Anyanwu is "a great African ancestress. She encompasses and epitomizes defiance, acceptance, compromise, determination, and courage" (Salvaggio, 81). It seems that some critics tend to romanticize and essentialize Anyanwu's character, something that the novel seems to contest. Indeed, in spite of Anyanwu's qualities, Butler's Afrofuturist narrative emphasizes on other dimensions of her humanity—the desire to live, fear of death, the burden of responsibility for her kinship members yet unborn—as at the end of the novel she finally surrenders rather than destroy herself. 'Seed' as Doro explains signifies "people too valuable to be casually killed" (Butler, 14).

However, 'wild seed' refers to Anyanwu's difference. She does not fear Doro as much as the others; she resists his plan to exploit her body for breeding by refusing to be tamed. Through her body's abilities, she can impregnate herself to please Doro: "I can be now. Your seed still lives inside me" (Butler 129). Or, in order to survive, she can self-abort her pregnancies, for: "within her body she killed his seed. She disconnected the two small tubes through which her own seed traveled to her womb. She had done this many

[31] Joseph Mengele known as The Angel of Death was a German officer and physician during World War II who performed deadly experiences on Jewish prisoners. For more detailed information, see The Holocaust Encyclopedia (website at https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/fr/article/josef-mengele).

times when she thought she had given a man enough children. Now she did it to avoid giving any children at all, to avoid being used" (Butler 131). Anyanwu's body is not only a black body used for breeding, it is also a sexualized body through which men satisfy their own physical desire. Thus, Butler's portrayal of black female subjectivity allows her novel to underscore the possibility of resistance through the female body of Anyanwu, while simultaneously portraying and demonstrating the horrors accomplished on the bodies of the female salves, as seen through Doro's sexual violence towards Anyanwu. Afful points out that "Anyanwu's body is both the means through which she is enslaved and her biggest resource for any kind of resistance to that enslavement" (566). Indeed, when one of Doro's sons sexually attacks Anyanwu, she transforms herself into a leopard and, through her survival instinct, kills him to protect her female body and escape physical abuse. Doro comments that "everyone aboard has been warned against molesting you. My sons have been doubly warned. Lale chose to ignore me. I cannot seem to breed stupidity out of some of my people" (Butler 84).

Doro never physically hurts Anyanwu. However, in the shared home space, when Anyanwu becomes defiant and insubordinate, he physically punishes her by sending her to another man, Thomas. This man embodies the Western white male who has no respect for black people as "Anyanwu's new position as a slave speaks to these parallels, as her subject position as a Black foreign woman and now Doro's slaver further removes her from the legal and temporal schemas that govern the rest of her adopted society. She is neither alive, nor dead in this new position. She has been reduced to a living object" (Afful 567). She is now subjected to the experience of "social death" (Orlando Patterson) that marks the life of the slave. Anyanwu first resists to Thomas' disgusting appearance and despicable

personality. Though, with time, she learns to gain his trust and "defiance, however, soon gives way to acceptance—and it is here, once again, that Anyanwu accepts the constraints of her world and tries to make something decent and productive out of the indecent situation in which she finds herself" (Salvaggio 81). A friendship and a physical attraction spark between Anyanwu and Thomas, proving that Anyanwu's compassionate, trustworthy, and healing behavior shatters and defeats Doro's evil plan to punish her. Through this event, Anyanwu resists Doro's punishment as she compromises and follows Doro's order to 'breed' children with Thomas. In some ways, this form of acceptance might imply that she becomes a submissive. To the reader, it might suggest that she becomes a willing and complying slave. Thus, her submission exposes a very ambivalent form of resistance.

However, in either of these situations—making compromises or resisting, Anyanwu seems to get caught in Doro's relentless scheming and in many ways fails not only herself, but also others who care for her and try to protect her. In other words, Butler emphasizes Anyanwu's failure as the force of slavery. Indeed, there are no compromises within slavery. Ultimately, any compromise will contribute to maintaining this institutionalized form of human commodification. Doro cannot seem to bear or fathom Anyanwu's happiness in any of her endeavors assigned or voluntary chosen. Doro, as the embodiment of a master, cannot tolerate his ego to be challenged and bruised by one of his 'seeds', nonetheless, Anyanwu, who he cannot control. Therefore, through the use of his powers and his position as a master/colonizer, Doro punishes Anyanwu even further by killing Thomas as an act of revenge and possession which allows her to remain alive. Anyanwu's kind compassion towards Thomas saved her from death as he gave his life to

Doro in exchange for hers "he held out a remarkably steady hand. 'let her go home to her husband and children,' he said. Without a word, Doro grasped the hand. At his touch, the smooth young body he had worn collapses and Thomas' body, thin and full of sores stood a little straighter…In an instant, the eyes of a friend had become demon's eyes" (Butler 186).

Last but not least, through the black female body, Butler portrays the most epic form of resistance when Anyanwu decides to commit suicide to be free at last. As Salvaggios states, "her personal goal is freedom but given the obstacles that constantly prevent her from achieving that goal, she learns to make advancements through concessions" (81). However, when Doro's intrusion and disruption of Anyanwu's new life of her self-built colony causes the deaths of several of her children, Anyanwu comes to terms with the ultimate realization that the only way to escape Doro's eternal oppression and control—being an immortal—is her own death. Butler depicts suicide as a liberating and resisting act, rather than an act of cowardice and fearfulness. Indeed, during slavery, this action was also the only way in which to diminish the master's property and wealth. Suicide was a human and a political act of resistance and, nevertheless, of suffering. As Salvaggio explains:

> Butler's heroines can tell us much about her science fiction precisely because they are the power, about black women who must face tremendous societal constraints. We might expect them to be rebellious. We might expect them to reverse the typical male SF stereotype and replace male tyranny with femaletyrant. This does not happen. Though Butler's heroines are dangerous and

> powerful women, their goal is not power. They are heroines not because they conquer the world, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny (81).

However, Anyanwu does not proceed with her suicidal plan as Doro, unexpectedly, submits to her, making promises to never hurt, control, and oppress her, nor kill anyone else out of pure entertainment and power-control gratification. Therefore, in *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu's black female body embodies resistance as she uses her body to defy male oppression, and uses her body as means to reclaim her own black female identity.

In her Afrofuturist narrative, Octavia Butler uses the notion of animality—as the otherness of the black female body—as means to escape and survive patriarchal and colonial oppression, as well as a means to reconnect with the natural world. In her essay, Madhu Dubey explains that:

> Afro-diasporic as well as Euro-American women's science fiction exploits the trope of becoming animal not only to explore the implications of (black people and woman) being identified with animal nature, but also to call into question dualistic and overlapping oppositions between nature and culture, magic and science, animal and human, body and mind, female and male. European and African, and so forth (35).

In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu is described to be essentially a healer. However, it is her ability to take on animal forms that makes her invaluable to Doro's breeding plan of seed villages. Anyanwu's magical ability to heal and shapeshift causes her to be identified as a 'witch' in both her native African village and the New World. Dubey points out that "in common with other women writers of speculative fiction, Butler uses the terms 'magic' and

'witchcraft' to legitimate distinctively female bodies of knowledge that are discredited by the standards of modern Western science" (36). Likewise, Anyanwu uses her shapeshifting abilities to invoke beliefs worshipped by her people in her African villages, in order to protect herself and avoid, out of compassion, unnecessary killings. She explains, "then I became a sacred python, and no one dared to harm me. The python shape brought me luck. We were needing rain then to save the yam crops, and while I was a python, the rains came. The people decided my magic was good and it took them a long time to want to kill me again" (Butler 16). When she is taken to the New World, Anyanwu uses her leopard animal shape along with others, several times to protect herself from physical and sexual abuse, as well as to shield herself from breeding more slaves imposed by Doro. In fact, Dubey argues that "if the animal realm usually offers women writers the license to explore sexuality and motherhood outside the constraints of patriarchal culture, in *Wild Seed* this realm offers Anyanwu the freedom allusion to be a sexual, reproductive creature" (37).

By using the animal tropes in her Afrofuturist narrative, Butler allows her heroine to reclaim her identity as a black female African under the oppression of slavery and colonization. In some ways, Anyanwu embodies the metaphorical Earth, as through her animality she connects to the wilderness and becomes one with nature. In fact, this analogy exactly parallels the stereotype of the animalized black woman, close to nature and Earth, hyper-fertile and sexualized, as we find it in male writers from Joseph Conrad to Aimé Césaire. Thus, Butler uses the speculative form of Afrofuturism to criticize male fantasies of the black female body. By doing so, she explores the dualism animal/human as an antislavery narrative response to traditional slave narratives[32]. Even if the novel presents

[32] For more information about antislavery literature see Frederick Douglass autobiographical memoire *Narrative* (1845) and Toni Morisson's novel *Beloved* (1987).

historical events of racialized U.S slavery, it is not the form of slavery in which Anyanwu is subjected. Indeed, her master Doro does not practices the same form of slavery than the white Western colonizers; being a male of African descent, his sole purpose is to find his kinsmen in order to create a new evolved race by breeding them into superhumans with special abilities and superpowers. Thus, the notion of race is interweaved into the novel's use of animal tropes but not as sole discourse. As Dubey states:

> The burden of bestiality is most heavily borne by slave women in the novel, who embody all shades of the racial spectrum. Most of the animal references in the novel appear in relation to the reproductive dimensions of slavery. What reduces women slaves to the level of cows, goats, or mares it that they are bred and mated like cattle, and their offspring expropriated as the property of their masters. The term 'animal' in *Wild Seed* is most frequently used to describe a female creature that is deprived of sexual and reproductive agency (38).

Likewise, Anyanwu decides to shapeshift into animals to avoid Doro's sexual coupling and reproductive schemes. However, by transforming Anyanwu into an animal, Butler exposes the human condition and its treatment of other human beings as animals. This paradoxical statement reinforces the dualism animal/human as Butler uses the word 'animal' in its conventional form to describe the savage other as 'human'. She also uses it to describe Doro, Anyanwu's master, as an 'animal' to expose the ways in which slavery dehumanizes both its executioners and its victims. In other words, through her Afrofuturist narrative, Butler uses animal/human distinctions to show how the discourse around slavery—within and outside traditional slave narratives, rationalizes the exploitation of women's bodies.

Moreover, Anyanwu's animals shapeshifting is a means to escape patriarchal oppression and connect with nature[33], which recalls her African heritage:

> women writers tend to blur the boundaries between human and animal in order to explore and affirm women's difference from masculinist notions of science and culture define in opposition to nonhuman nature. If science fiction written by men has typically represented women as others of reason, women writers revalorize this otherness as the basis of a more responsible and reciprocal relation to nature" (Dubey 33).

Indeed, whenever Anyanwu's mind and body aches for her concealed African identity, she turns to her animal body: "In anger that night, Anyanwu took her leopard form for the first time in years. She hunted deer, stalking them as she had at home so long ago, moving with the old stealth, using her eyes and her ears even more efficiently than a true leopard might. The result was as it had been at home. Deer were deer" (Butler 172). Thus, whenever situations and human interactions become too overwhelming for her to handle, Anyanwu shapeshifts into an animal in order to escape her own reality and connect with the wild environment, as if both formed one: "She had watched such creatures before, watched them longingly. She thought she could do what they did, thought she could become one of them. She could almost feel the sensation of wetness, of strength, of moving through the water as swiftly as a bird through the air. She longed to try, and she feared to try" (Butler 84). Anyanwu becomes what she is made into, but she does not defy the Eurocentric separation between the human and the animal. Indeed, throughout her metamorphosis she conserves

[33] In other feminist theories, the notion of nature is referred to as an 'ecofeminist science', see, Jane Donarwerth 's "Frankensteins' Daughters: *Women Writing Science Fiction*" (1997) and Ynestra King's "Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology" (2005).

her human's consciousness as "she was still partly human in most of her changes long after she had ceased to look human" (Butler 189). In order to transform into an animal and live unconditionally through its body's experience, Anyanwu longs for knowledge and specifically for other species' knowledge to fully embody nature and connect to its elements "Anyanwu ate better than anyone, because for her, the flesh of the fish told her all she needed to know about the creature's physical structure—all she needed to know to take its shape and live as it did" (Butler 86).

However, Anyanwu does not forget or lose her identity when she transforms into an animal. In fact, she experiences being an animal through the representation of its body while keeping her human conscious mind. By narrating Anyanwu's animal experiences from a human point of view, Butler emphasizes the mind/body opposition and its limit. While allowing Anyanwu to become animal, Butler shows the importance for her of maintaining both her human knowledge and her animal experience in order to escape and survive Doro's oppression. In other words, in the Afrofuturist narrative *Wild Seed*, Butler not once narrates from the point of view of the animals that Anyanwu uses to transform herself. By doing so, Butler highlights how her heroine never once renounced her black female identity "she was who she was" (Butler 220). Instead, she finds alternative modes of escaping and surviving slavery and colonization in both Africa and the New World. Only by adopting an animal shape can Anyanwu truly feel free of Doro's control and oppression. Even though the body and world of animals are instrumental to Anyanwu's survival and search for knowledge, Butler underscores Anyanwu's identity and identity through her ability to reason[34] as a human being while metamorphosing and representing

[34] For more information on the notion of reason adhering to psychological realism, see Sherona Ben-Tov text *The Artificial Paradise: Science Fiction and American Reality* (1995)

the otherness of nature. Thus, Butler uses animal tropes as means to reclaim and expand Anyanwu's hybrid identity through the quest of knowledge.

# Conclusion

To conclude—as explained and argued in my analysis—in the African American Afrofuturistic novel *Wild Seed,* Octavia Butler exposes three aspects of the struggle of the African people in American society, from the beginning of slavery throughout the centuries to the present. Indeed, during colonialization, African slaves had to struggle constantly and adapt to the patriarchal rules of the Western colonizer. Through oppression, the Western world uses racialization to maintain their colonial projects, which allows them to create and obtain their own industrialized modernity. Thus, the institution of slavery generated intergenerational trauma. In literature, the representation of slavery and its trauma through the transmission of historical events, is essential to the recollection and construction of a collective memory and collective African American identity. The intergenerational trauma of slavery also emphasizes the objectification of black bodies. In fact, in the institution of slavery, the black body was used as an economic commodity without social value. Through the slave market, forced reproduction, and forced labor on the plantation, the black body became a vehicle of white wealth. It was an opportunity for the Western colonizers to build a modern world by oppressing and dominating black bodies in order to accumulate capital. Therefore, the slave's body, and the body in general, is indispensable in understanding how identity is formed and organized in Butler's fiction. The question of just what constitutes a body, especially the human body, and its meanings, is raised through the institution of slavery.

Furthermore, in *Wild Seed*, Butler's speculative narrative challenges gender norms and their conceptions, as she explores alternative social structures and forms of interaction

for societies and characters, and different beliefs around gender roles. Through the use of space and temporality as processes through which to understand and connect issues of embodiment and gender identity, and the construction of use of black female identity, Butler breaks with perceived perceptions and representations of female characters in science fiction. In fact, Butler challenges the notion of identity through the representation of Anyanwu as her character embodies the resisting black female body. By challenging identity and its limits through black female subjectivity, she exposes the black struggle, specifically the black female struggle for survival against patriarchal oppression. Through Anyanwu, Butler portrays a black female character who embodies African womanhood as Anyanwu is seen as the mother and caretaker of her village with magical abilities, described by her people as a 'witch'. She is also portrayed as a strong independent woman who faces various obstacles both in Africa and the New World. Throughout her life, she tries to overcome these obstacles by using her best qualities—healing and loving—in order to survive an intolerable world. Her cyborg identity ranges from her powers of healing, to shapeshifting. Through her magical abilities, Anyanwu becomes the embodiment of resistance as she challenges and resists Doro's oppression. Also, as she struggles to assimilate the new Western culture of the New World, resistance is a means to reclaim her black female body and African identity from Western colonization. As well, Octavia Butler uses animal tropes—as the otherness of the black female body—as means to reconnect, escape, and survive patriarchal and colonial oppression, but also, as means to reconnect with nature. In fact, Anyanwu's animality, being a representation of her cyborg identity, allows her to feel free of any human oppression while challenging her own identity. She

has to resist, reclaim, and redefine her black female identity in order to survive both Western colonization and Doro's inhumane oppression and psychological mind games.

Throughout *Wild Seed*, the reader might wonder if Octavia Butler's Afrofuturist narrative should be categorized as a 'dystopian' or 'utopian' novel. In fact, in her essay "*Wild Seed*", Elyce Rae Helford argues that "Butler seems to be less interested in such abstract labels than in showing how her doubly oppressed black female protagonists can and will survive, against all odds and despite enormous sacrifices and compromises" (2472). Indeed, the end of the narrative, almost perceived as a cliff-hanger, seems to leave the reader confused. One expects Anyanwu—after years of struggle, oppression, and escape attempts, to either die or kill Doro. In fact, from the first day she met Doro, she has experienced horrible things, from witnessing killings, to being owned, sexually used, mentally tortured, and physically controlled, to losing her beloved kinship members one after one, to finally escaping and living in animal shapes. These elements would be enough to identify this speculative fiction as a dystopian narrative. However, it is her survival that forces Doro to finally submit to her as he promises her that he will no longer use his powers for control. Additionally, he implores her to spend their eternal life together as lovers. Thus, this unexpected 'happy' ending could respond to a utopian narrative. Yet, through the end of the novel, the impression of Anyanwu's victory—though far from achieved—over Doro and oppressive patriarchy, seems to be pending.

In other words, Butler does not depict a story in which the power struggle of her protagonists becomes a phenomenal success. Instead, by portraying established social systems, she chooses to understand how these systems work through the portrayal of each small triumph achieved by her always-disempowered characters. From my point of view,

Butler seems to write an Afrofuturist narrative to show that identity is more fluid and complex than just being simply white and/or black. Through female embodiment and black female subjectivity, she foregrounds the concerns of women living in a racialized patriarchal world by exposing the conjunctions of black women's oppressed status—that of a woman and an African American. As Helford explains, "one of her primary reasons for writing literature is to depict the survival of African-American culture throughout history and into the future, no matter what the cost to any individual" (2472). The crusade for racial freedom and gender equality is an open discourse in Butler's fiction.

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